

WILL SKEPTICISM TREND TOWARDS EPICUREANISM?

BY JOHN HEINTZ

BIOLOGY teaches us that man, in common with the rest of the animate world, finds it necessary, in order to survive, to adapt himself to his physical environment. But there is another adaptation that man makes to his world, which he does not share with the lower orders of creation, which constitutes an adjustment problem peculiar to man and which springs from his superior mental endowment. It has been rightly called the urge of man to relate himself to life and his ultimate destiny.

The study of anthropology reveals no race so low in the scale of civilization but what this problem has presented itself and has been dealt with in some manner, however crude. Animism, ancestor worship, wooden idols, sacred animals and mountains, totem-poles, the great religions and philosophies all testify to the effort on the part of humanity to adjust itself to its immediate condition and ultimate destiny. All along the line of man's evolution from a lower to a higher civilization there is revealed the phenomenon that he has been impelled by his reasoning faculty to answer the questions, in one way or another, which the universe aroused in his mind.

Now if we consider this apparent need on the part of humanity for bringing itself into some sort of harmonious relationship with the world in connection with the steady increase of religious skepticism, it forces one to the inescapable conclusion that there must be great numbers of persons who are at present engaged in the process of adjusting themselves to a changed viewpoint. The dissolution of the ancestral order, to use Walter Lippmann's phrase, has brought innumerable persons face to face with a readjustment problem; it has created the need for an attitude consistent with newer convictions. Faced, then, by the certainty of a gradually accelerating

growth of skepticism and by the consequent necessity for adjusting themselves to a changed order of things on the part of an ever-increasing number of persons, can we predict, with any degree of certainty, just what direction this adjustment movement will take? By what intellectual form it will express itself?

But first it will be well for us to understand that in the realm of morals things do not just happen. Moral history is not merely a chronological series of events. It is a continuous chain of cause and effect. That there is a sufficient reason back of every leaf that stirs is not more certain than that every circumstance in moral history has been the inescapable effect of contributing causes. We read with incredulity about the fastings, scourgings, macerations, self-inflicted penalties and unheard of practises which were indulged in during the ascetic period of Christianity. Surely here is something so grotesque and unusual that it creates the appearance of spontaneity, but one may start with hard, practical, skeptical Roman Stoicism and trace, step by step, the gradual modifications of thought which led to that frenzied religious period.

As with the past, so with today. Cause and effect is ceaselessly at work. And while, owing to the speculative nature of thought, the inadequacy of knowledge, and the numerous historical accidents which intervened between the two periods, it would have been impossible for a Stoical philosopher to have foreseen the ascetic period of Christianity, we today, because science has given us a real conception of our world, because knowledge is more certain and diffused, and also because our machine civilization possesses a more enduring quality than did those of the warring nations of antiquity, may analyze and forecast the developments in society with a fair degree of accuracy. I believe the key to the trend of skepticism is to be found in its reaction to three fundamental problems which confront every individual—virtue, death and the meaning of life. Analyzing these three problems in the order named I shall endeavor to show that the reaction of skepticism to them must necessarily be an Epicurean one.

It appears to me that a thoroughly logical skepticism cannot go beyond utility in its search for moral sanction. Once it abandons, in its reaction to virtue, the ideas that moral sanction is derived from on high and that the moral nature of man is of divine origin, utility becomes their only explanation. It is quite true that skeptics may

love certain moral ideas for their intrinsic worth. They may also recognise fully the supremacy and authority of conscience and possess a Stoical regard for virtuous actions carrying them out without regard for the effect upon themselves. Their sense of justice may be keen. Their emotional feelings may be sensitively fine and pure. Nevertheless, if they are logical skeptics they cannot regard such moral conceptions as being intuitive, originally innate, or dogmatically authorized, but must esteem them to be but a crystallized heritage from a remote past during which foretime they originated in response to utility but became metamorphosed, by an association of ideas, from but a means to happiness to an end justifying their own existence.

Skepticism, therefore, inasmuch as its reaction to the question of virtue compels it to analyze moral notions, and because it has dispensed with dogmatic authority and cannot unquestioningly accept inherited moral conceptions, must depend for its acceptance of them upon their utility. In other words, virtues, under skepticism, will be raised to the position of supreme arbiter in the field of morals, thus transferring the authority for them from a source without to one within. That reason may prove to be fallible in its findings and that some disagreement may ensue is not germane to the argument the point of which is that skepticism, driven by the logic of its position to dissociate moral ideas from the mass of superstitious and traditional elements that have entwined around them, distrustful of dogmatic authority and mindful of the fluctuations of moral history, will be compelled to depend on reason for a guide and utility for its criterion in defining what constitutes virtue. In such an attempt to place morals on a rational basis skepticism will be using a similar method to that which was used in the early days of the human race when ethics and theology were separate and distinct things; when the test of morals was how they worked in the everyday affairs of life. Thus skepticism, in its search for moral justification, simply cannot escape the Epicurean viewpoint which is that virtue has no value in itself; its sole justification consisting in its being a means for the promotion of happiness, or in other words, in its utility.

With regard to the problem of death the inescapable reaction to it on the part of skepticism appears to have been completely stated in Epicureanism. Boiled down to its essentials that philosophy af-

firmed that death cannot be felt. When we are dead we are just the same as if we had never been born. Therefore the only time death can injure us is when we allow ourselves to think of it. It is inevitable and worrying about it cannot make it otherwise and deprives us, for the time being, of pleasure which is the real end of existence. Thus, he who is truly wise will banish all thought of it out of his mind.

Present-day skepticism can be contrasted with its predecessors of antiquity on account of the wide scope of knowledge which has been placed at its disposal. Science and scholarship have examined into records and records left by the past and the result has been to entirely disprove all the revelations and prophecies and promises of the revealed religions. Up to the present time no acceptable proof has been presented which justifies a belief in a future existence for man. Confronted by such facts what is there left for skepticism to do but to resign itself to the possibility of annihilation and accept the thoroughly sensible and applicable adjustment to such a situation as is taught by Epicureanism?

Will skepticism accept the Epicurean viewpoint regarding the meaning of life?

Probably the most depressing thought that can come to anyone is that all the struggling and achieving of humanity, the everpressing onward to greater heights, will eventually be canceled by its annihilation. The mental image of this earth spinning through space a barren planet, utterly devoid of life, not only depicts a tragedy more despairingly poignant than any that blacken the pages of history but impresses the mind with the utter futility and purposelessness of the operations of nature considered in their entirety. However, against this gloomy background is the fact that one may extract, in a single span of human existence, a certain amount of pleasure, and in a world created by a fortuitous combination of chemical substances, in which no purpose, no reason for its creation can be discovered, in which no divine plan is discernable, and in which the true meaning of life must therefore be reasoned out, pleasure irresistibly presents itself as that which best serves the ends of existence. One world at a time must be the motto of a consistent skepticism. This being the case the immediate end of life are the logical goal of our efforts and there can be no question, I think, but that they are best served by hedonism (I am using the term broad-

ly, in its true Epicurean sense, which differs greatly from the more constricted use of it in the modern sexy novel) for not only is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, in the broadest and best sense of these words, absolutely in conformance with human nature, and therefore a legitimate aim, but they surely constitute the most sensible reason that skepticism will be able to give, outside the struggle for survival, for the justification of everyday human activities.

Now if all this reasoning is logical and sound, in proportion as skepticism spreads through society there will develop a moral movement whose trend will incline toward, and approximate, at least, the views which Epicurus expounded to his disciples in his garden at Athens. This result, of course, will not be accomplished by deliberately attempting to foster such views upon society but will be brought about by a development inherent within skepticism itself. Science has given us positive assurance that we live in the sort of a world which Epicurus sensed, despite the imperfections of his knowledge, and his philosophy, inasmuch as it was the logical reaction of a practical mind to that kind of a universe, inevitably stated the case for straight thinking along purely naturalistic lines for all time. It attempted to relate man to a rational world, one free from superstition and supernatural intervention, which is exactly the problem that faces skepticism today.

Admittedly this Epicurean reaction to the problems of virtue, death and the meaning of life may not prove to be competent to solve all of the difficulties which grow out of the modern complexity of society. The mere fact that a man comes to regard virtue as being resolved out of utility does not necessarily make him more moral than when he regarded it as being dogmatically authorized. Walter Lippmann points out in his latest book that the danger in hedonism is due to the yielding to immature desires and that the salvation of morals in an unbelieving world depends upon a disinterested type of character in business, government and sexual relations which the demands of our complex machine civilization is bringing into existence; a sort of Stoical type which is destined to justify the wisdom of the sages and the insight of high religion.

All of which is very likely true. In which case history appears destined to repeat itself and the future skeptical society may conceivably witness Epicureanism and Stoicism developing side by side,

except that where they were rivals in the ancient Roman state, in the modern one they will complement each other. Unless skepticism dispenses with logic altogether the future society will be basically and fundamentally Epicurean because that philosophy is the inevitable reaction to the place of man in nature as science has revealed it to us. If Stoicism plays a role at all it will be that of a complementary one. Supplying what Epicureanism fails to supply it will grow out of a need of modern complex machine society just as it grew out of the need for patriotism in the militaristic Roman state. Rather than a philosophy, with certain tenets to expound, it will furnish the religious motive in an age of skepticism.